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ABSTRACT

The low level of family involvement in school affairs has become a predominant explanation for a wide variety of school problems. Although there is little data to support the two underlying assumptions of this causal relationship, i.e., a decrease in family involvement, and the efficacy of parent participation in enhancing student performance, there is potential in the intervention implications stemming from this hypothesized relationship. Most intervention efforts have focused on increasing parent participation, however, in the absence of any serious analysis of the content and purpose of that participation. Changing family conditions are repeatedly scapegoated in these discussions, yet the changing social conditions are a reality, and should generate a new level of discussion about home-school relations and alternative mechanisms to accommodate them. The "victim blaming" implicit in deficient parent participation explanations threatens to divert attention from collaborative home-school efforts and fruitful change. (JAC)

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# School Achievement:

# From deficient dialects to domestic dialogue

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Washington, D. C., August, 1982.

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Jean Ann Linney

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Student achievement and underachievement has been an issue of general concern for several decades. Intervention efforts to enhance achievement in the past 25 years have been based on a series of causal factors including inadequate early environmental stimulation, inadequate or ineffective teaching techniques, inappropriate school curricula, and racial biases. In the last decade there has been a further redirection in the predominant explanation for school problems. The family's role *vis a vis* the schools, and more specifically a decline in family support for and participation in the child's educational development has been cited. This paper considers the validity of some implicit assumptions in this problem definition and the implications of available empirical data for intervention outcomes. The historical context in which a family focus developed is overviewed, the construct of parent participation is reviewed, and two underlying assumptions of this problem definition are considered: (1) families have been involved in schools and the quality and quantity of participation has declined, ie., that increases in school problems are correlated with change in patterns of family involvement; and (2) family participation enhances student achievement. Finally, intervention implications are discussed.

The Historical Context: The changing American family.

In the early 1970's we became aware of a surprising number of ways in which American families deviated from the idealized norm. We learned of rising divorce rates, single parent families resulting from divorce and adolescent pregnancy, and a frightening incidence of child abuse. As the Civil Rights movement expanded to women, children and the handicapped, the circumstances of families became more prominent and attention was directed to parents, parenting and family dysfunction.

In 1973 at Senate hearings before the subcommittee on Children and Youth, Walter Mondale said:

> I have worked on practically all the human problems--the hunger route, the Indian route, the migratory labor route, the equality of education route, and the housing route; all of them--and increasingly reached a conclusion that is not very profound. It all begins with the family. That is the key institution in American life. If it breaks down, if it is unable to do what society has assumed it will do, then all of these other problems develop. They are symptoms I think of more fundamental family breakdown.

With statements like these from political figures, researchers, and social critics, the family was keyed as a causal factor in almost all social problems. A primary campaign focus of Carter's 1976 presidential campaign was "the steady erosion and weakening of our families". By 1976 the crisis in American families was a widely perceived phenomenon.

In his recent book on family policy Steiner (1981) argues that "Family dysfunction became a public issue less because of actual evidence of massive numbers of new cases than because of a general uneasiness about family stability with which numerous families could empathize" (p.11). As family issues gained attention Steiner notes that

> "...scholars and politicians recast a plethora of old social policy questions--child development, social services public welfare--as issues of family policy. For example, where children's cognitive processes or deserted mothers might have been focal points earlier, the whole family now became the subject of interest. Commissions and committees that were organized early in the 1970's to think about children or social services reported later in the decade in terms of families and family policy" (Steiner, 1981, p. 21).

The Zeitgeist of the 70's was family and this backdrop provided explanations for persistent school problems such as declining achievement, discipline, violence and vandalism. While much of the general concern about families focused on family dysfunction and family decline, school problems were recast as the result of declining family involvement in a child's education and socialization. This idea was so widespread that in a 1976 Gallup Poll, two thirds of those surveyed blamed parents for declining test scores because they did not provide enough attention, help and supervision to their children (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

The popular press has contributed greatly to the perception of family disaffiliation with the school as a cause of school problems. With titles like "The Parent Gap", "Help, Teacher Can't Teach", and "Why Johnny Can't Read", school achievement and family circumstances were dramatically linked. Citing teacher comments like "only two parents showed up for PTA conferences", "parents don't care about their kids in school", "parents don't spend time with their children anymore", these explanations have solidified the perception that student achievement declines when parents withdraw from the process. Secondly, these relationships imply that the school is limited in how much it can achieve with the children of uninvolved parents.

Besides change in family functioning, there has been a growing sense that Americans barely participate in community systems like the schools. In a booklet published by the New Jersey School Board Association the author begins with the comment:

> "Today for the vast majority of people across America, citizen involvement in education is limited to voting for school board members or belonging to a parent/teacher organization. And the number of citizens who participate even to this extent becomes less each year." (Simon, 1981: p.5)

Family Involvement as a Construct

Parent participation. Family involvement. These are widely used concepts with varying and surplus meanings. Parent participation as it has been referred to in the literature and used as a variable in research and intervention varies from attendance at parent-teacher conferences to volunteer work as an aide in the classroom, from assistance with a child's homework to service on a parent advisory council. In part the multiple meanings relate to the speaker, the audience, and the specific group of parents and children being discussed. For example, publications for teachers discuss methods of drawing parents in to the teaching process, communicating more effectively with parents and working with parents as a team. For administrators there is focus on forming parent advisory

councils and working with school boards. Citizen groups and school reformers urge parents to organize for recognition, input and to demand school accountability.

Age and ethnic group of the child, and the education, income and employment status of the parents further differentiate definitions of what is meant by parent participation, but not necessarily in consistent ways. For example citizen groups advocate the inclusion of low income minority parents in decision making and policy setting roles in the school. School personnel are more likely to advocate a supportive role for this group of parents or an education program for them teaching parenting skills, or how to assist their child with school. Most of the discussion of parent involvement with the schools is most relevant for young children, certainly pre-high school yet the rhetoric is so general that the differing parent-child and family-school relationships of different developmental levels are not acknowledged. Consequently, discussion of the construct family involvement or parent participation is broad and poorly defined.

Opportunities for Family Involvement.

Much of the discussion of parent participation asserts that parental involvement in schools has declined. As a result or in conjunction with the instability in American families, it is suggested that parents spend less time with their children and are less involved in the school than at some time in the past. The history of parent involvement and efforts over the past 20 years suggest the opposite. As a result of legislated actions and citizen efforts parents may have more opportunities to be involved in a wider range of roles vis a vis the school.

Since the mid 1960's there have been major federal efforts to improve the educational standing of disadvantaged, low income and handicapped children, e.g., Title I, Title III, Head Start, and P.L. 94-142 Education for the Handicapped Act. Most of these have mandated parent involvement and community participation in various aspects of the school's procedure and program. For example, parents became involved in the instructional process in Head Start classrooms, in the planning and evaluation of services for their children during the IEP procedures required by PL 94-142, and as members of advisory councils mandated by the Title I and Title III programs. Davies reports that in 1978, Title I programs alone had over 60,000 Parent Advisory

Councils nationwide with about 900,000 members.

Most school districts have initiated parent advisory councils not necessarily linked to a federal program. Typically these councils are in addition to the Parent-Teacher Organizations but sometimes formed with the assistance of the PTA for recruitment and selection. There have been significant citizen efforts to increase involvement in school functioning. Although membership figures are not available, the National PTA reports itself to be growing and a significant political force at the local, state and national levels (Baisinger, 1979). The National Committee for Citizens in Education was formed in 1973 and has provided assistance to hundreds of school groups and parent groups. Their explicit purpose is to increase the quantity and quality of parent involvement in the public school system.

Overall it appears that parents have more opportunities to become involved in the school. New parent advisory roles are in addition to those mechanisms for parent-teacher or school collaboration that have been available for several decades (e.g., room mother, chaperone or aide at school function). Hence even if participation in parent advisory councils, IEP meetings and in-school roles is minimal it should represent an increase in the percentage and overall

numbers of families involved in some form or another. Since most of the federally funded programs are targeted at families previously excluded (e.g., handicapped children) or underrepresented (e.g., disadvantaged or low income) the total number of different families involved should have increased. Although data on those numbers is unavailable some increase seems inevitable.

The perception of non-involvement held by school personnel and the general public may be the result of particular subgroups being less involved in school activities. Very little data is available on levels of involvement (however defined) by subgroup. Public concern has been raised about single parents and working mothers as particularly stressed groups potentially more likely to reduce involvement with their children. Most of the studies of working mothers and single parents have focused on how parents spend their day generally lumping together all time with the children so that time together in school related functions is not distinguishable. Medrich, Roizen, Rubin & Buckley (1982) have systematically studied the time use of families of 764 sixth grade children in 20 different neighborhoods in Oakland, California in 1976. Their data collection procedures involved interview schedules focused on the child's out of school time. Parents and children were questioned regarding activities and responsibilities of

the child in and outside of the family, and the time spent in mutual activities. Their data indicate that generally working parents organize their time so as to include time for child-related activities. They report no significant differences between working mothers and non-working mothers in time spent in child-related activities, and that "children of all backgrounds were about equally likely to spend time with their parents on schoolwork" (Medrich, et al., 1982, p. 234). Rather than work status or marital status, they report that parental time spent in child related activities is better predicted by income and education level (Medrich, et al., 1981, Rubin, 1982).

Several studies suggest that white parents participate in school activities more than black parents, high SES families more than low SES families (Brookover et al., 1979; Coleman, et al., 1966; Mayeske, 1968; Medrich, et al., 1982). Further, the higher the education level of the parents the more likely they are to be involved in school-related activities. Under some circumstances however, low income, less educated, and minority parents may be substantially involved in their child's school. One example comes from the struggle for community-control in the Oceanhill- Brownsville district of New York City during the late 1960's. Gottfried's (1970) survey of parents in this area found that 86% reported visiting their school in the

previous year, and 76% thought that parents should have more to say about what happens in the city schools.

Rather than a decline in school participation by parents there is reason to believe that opportunities for parent participation have increased, and that parents have become more concerned about having input into matters that affect their children. While evidence is not available on actual numbers of parents involved, the increase in opportunities suggests that more families would be contributing time to school related activities. The involvement of families in the child's homework and home-based assistance does not differ systematically by demographic characteristics although it may be the case that an overall decline has occurred in parental aide to children. Curriculum changes and advances in multiple fields have led some parents to feel unable to help their child. Other parents report being instructed by the teacher not to help their child because they don't know the teaching methods being used.

Given the increase in opportunities and the growing belief that parents ought to be involved in the school, rather than a decline in levels of participation from some previous era, it seems more likely that instead expectations regarding the nature of parent participation have changed. As parent participation has been introduced as a solution to

previous problems (e.g., alienation of minority groups, a mechanism for community input to make school programs more responsive to local needs), it has become part of the problem itself. Now it seems that participation is so accepted that the level of participation is no longer satisfactory, and for individual students presenting problems to the school an immediate explanation is that parents are not involved, not involved enough, or not involved in the right way. Furthermore limited success of ongoing programs and curricula can be attributed to failure to fully involve families! Schraft & Kagan (1979) assert that "Professional educators want the power to control schools while holding parents responsible if the educational mission fails" (p .7).

Efficacy of Parent Participation

Generally it is assumed that parent participation in a child's education will enhance achievement and that parent participation in and of itself is desirable. There is a surprising dearth of empirical data on the efficacy of parent participation. Efforts to relate parent participation to student achievement are limited by a multitude of intervening and mediating variables (e.g., the student's ability, the teacher's teaching skill, the age and educational history of the child, and school-community relations). Although a relationship seems obvious

intuitively, the literature supports only a modest correlation between varying forms of parent participation and student achievement. The issue has been approached in a variety of ways, e.g., comparisons of high and low achieving students on parent initiated activity with the school (Rankin, 1967), in depth study of high achieving urban schools (Phi Delta Kappan, 1980), and interventions manipulating the level of parent involvement (e.g., early intervention programs).

The 1966 Coleman Report is often cited as evidence for the relationship between parent participation and student achievement. Mann (1975) cites several additional studies supporting this relationship but also notes that "a breakthrough in student achievement has not been made" (p .8). Davies (1978) similarly notes that while most parents say that their primary motivation for participation is to help their children, there are not sufficient data to definitively correlate parent participation and student achievement.

Research from early intervention studies provides some experimental manipulation of the nature of parent participation with infants and preschoolers (e.g., no involvement, mother receiving tutoring, mother assisting as aide in day care program). In his review of these programs

Bronfenbrenner concludes:

> The evidence indicates that the family is the most effective and economical system for fostering and sustaining the development of the child. The evidence indicates further that the involvement of the child's family as an active participant is critical to the success of any intervention program. Without such family involvement, any effects of intervention, at least in the cognitive sphere, are likely to be ephemeral, to appear to erode rapidly once the program ends. In constrast, the involvement of the parents as partners in the enterprise provides an on-going system which can reinforce the effects of the program while it is in operation and help to sustain them after the program ends. (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, p. 55)

At the primary grade levels a variety of interventions generally enhancing overall parental awareness of the child's development and schoolwork have been successful in raising achievement. For example, Smith (1968) encouraged parents to provide conditions conducive to good study habits e.g., regular bed time, ten minutes a day spent reading with the child, and a quiet place for homework. They reported achievement gains compared to a control group for children in grades K through six. The evaluative studies of early intervention programs indicate that parent involvement may be a necessary component for developmental gains (achievement), however studies with older children suggest that it may not be a sufficient condition. For example, the Follow Through planned variation models based primarily on

parent participation did not yield greater achievement gains than alternative models with little or no parent focus (House, et al., 1978; Stebbins, et al., 1978).

Any relationship observed between parent participation and student achievement for school-aged children may be the result of other coexisting conditions. Brookover, et al. (1979) found that parent involvement did not account for a significant portion of the variance in achievement when included in a multiple regression with school climate variables, demographics, teacher attitudes, and school operating procedures. Parent participation may be a by-product of other school conditions or the result of some particular school-community relations. When other variables are included as mediators and covariates the relationship between parent activity and achievement is less clear.

Analyses considering parent participation in a more differentiated way have shown that the nature of the parental activities and the strength of their relationship to achievement varies by socioeconomic group, race and school characteristics. Brookover and his colleagues report:

> "... high parent involvement is associated with lower achievement in the high SES white schools. This suggests that parents of students in middle class white schools are not likely to be involved with the school unless

> the level of achievement is unsatisfactory. The positive relationship in the black schools [ achievement and parent involvement correlate .59 ] suggests that black parents may have some impact on the way school affects achievement." (Brookover, et al., 1979, p. 47)

Benson, Buckley & Medrich (1980) report a similar mediating effect in their analyses of middle school children. They compared high and low achieving students in high and low achieving schools holding SES constant. For the low SES children, parental input does make a difference although within limits. The involved parents "do not seem to increase the proportion of high achievers, [although] they clearly do reduce the proportion of low achievers" (p. 201).

The few available studies that include the most obvious mediating variables like race, SES, and age of the child suggest that generalized efforts to increase parent participation may be misdirected. For example the groups generally most underachieving are low income black and other minority students. The incidence studies show that black families are less likely to participate, but that when they do their efforts may be less effective than those of white parents in enhancing their child's achievement, at least in the elementary grades. Hence intervention programs rooted

in current thinking to increase the involvement of parents of low achieving, low income black students (ie., the disadvantaged student) may have disappointing results.

Proposing parent particpation certainly may be justified on the grounds of parental right and responsibility to give input to their child's education, however supporting parent participation on the grounds of its efficacy in enhancing achievement may be overgeneralization and premature. At best the literature indicates that under certain curcumstances participation is important, however it is also clear that a more complex schema is necessary to model an effective home school relationship with diverse groups of older children in school. As Schraft & Kagan (1979) conclude "... while the reports on the impact of parent participation are mixed and somewhat disappointing,[...] enough impact studies affirm the potential of parent participation for parents and students" (p .7). Both research and intervention efforts need to differentiate among the many forms of parent participation and identify useful matches between home and school characteristics.

## Intervention and Research Implications.

The notion of family involvement in education is likely here to stay. Like other explanatory frameworks it is more a product of the times than a breakthrough in scientific theorizing or the culmination of systematic research. It has a political history and roots in the democratic ideology as well as being an outgrowth of more recent social movements (e.g., Civil Rights movement, consumer rights, and bureaucratic accountability). While common perceptions are of declining parental interest and involvement in children's schooling, there is little empirical data or logical evidence to support the contention. The available data on the efficacy of parent participation suggest that in some segments an apparently causal relationship exists between parent participation and student achievement. The data also clearly indicate that the effect may not be generalizable to all age, ethnic and SES groups. Intervention efforts to mimic the presumed causal relationship have been disappointing. Overall the literature points to the need for more specific delineation of the parent participation construct and more multivariable research on school-family relationships if fruitful intervention results are to be achieved.

The research literature might be clarified by classifying studies on the basis of a more differentiated construct of parent participation. The available operational measures include a broad range of activities that vary on at least three dimensions: (1) Parental penetration into the school, ie., the extent to which parents are involved in school functions and activities. Monitoring school homework or fund raising are low penetration activities, while serving as a classroom aide or co-directing a school activity would be high penetration activities. (2) Potential for change, ie., the degree to which the parent activity has the potential to change school operations. Speaking to a class about careers proabably has little potential for school change, while collaboration in IEP planning has great potential for changing school procedures at least for the focal child. (3) Parental power, ie., the extent to which parents are seen as deficient versus competent to contribute to school decision making. This dimension is more associated with school and parents perceptions than specific activities, but may determine the nature of the activities proposed. Parent particpation mandated by federal efforts in programs for the disadvantaged has had minimal impact on public education (Schraft & Kagan, 1979). This may be due in part to school or parent perceptions that these parents are not qualified to make decisions about school procedure.

Intervention efforts and to some extent overall research in the realm of parent participation has reflected an idealized middle class notion of family. Changing family social conditions, e.g., working mothers, single parents, and smaller families are real changes and have importance for the nature of parent school relations. No longer can these be cited as causes of school problems. Once the exception, they are rapidly becoming the norm. In fact in 1977 and 1978 the "typical" American family of working father, homemaker mother and two minor children accounted for only 7% of husband-wife families (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1978). In 1980 more children under the age of 18 had working mothers than non-working mothers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1981).

Research may be necessary to study the factors that inhibit or limit parental effectiveness in the school setting. For example, why is it that the low SES families in the Benson, et al. (1980) study were not able to facilitate higher achievement for their children? What factors seem to dilute the efficacy of various forms of parent participation for older children?

Previous efforts have identified some important ingredients in successful parent participation. While Bronfenbrenner concludes that family is key to longterm maintenance of gains from early intervention programs, he qualifies that statement by saying that if parents are brought into the process in a way that undermines their confidence, this could actually make things worse. Schraft & Kagan (1979) corroborate the need for active and relatively important roles for parents in urban education programs. They indicate that efforts to enhance parent participation can no longer be "one way" exchanges as Lightfoot (1978) describes, where schools expect parents to change to fit the model best for the school. Rather efforts at parent participation need to focus more on collaboration and mechanisms for mutual exchange. "The goal of parent participation needs to become the creation of ongoing forums for collaboration rather than either parent confrontation or school system defense of the bureaucratic status quo" (Schraft & Kagan, 1979).

The level of family involvement in school affairs has become a predominant explanation for a wide variety of school problems. Although there is little data to support two underlying assumptions of this causal relationship (i.e., decrease in family involvement, and the efficacy of parent participation in enhancing student performance), there is

potential in the intervention implications stemming from the hypothesized relationship. Most intervention efforts have focused on increasing parent particpation, however, in the absence of serious analysis of the content and purpose of that participation. Changing family conditions have been repeatedly scapegoated in these discussions, yet the changing social conditions are changing reality and ought to generate a new level of discussion about home-school relationships and a diverse set of alternative mechanisms to accommodate them. The "victim blaming" implicit in deficient parent participation explanations threatens to divert attention from collaborative home-school efforts and fruitful change.

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